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17. ABSTRACT (MAX. 250 WORDS) An investigation of the possible causes of vandalism to public schools was undertaken to understand and control vandalism. The school was the unit of study, rather than the invididual, in that the investigation focused on a consideration of the sociopsychological differences between schools having different degrees of vandalism. Participating in the 2-year study were 16 schools from Syracuse, New York.

Community change, changes in the school program, student population and staff, administrative leadership, degree and type of interpersonal relationships, and the extent to which the welfare needs were satisfied were all related to disorganizations of personal relations and to vandalism. As a school system, the school has rules of conduct governing the relations between its members, and it has a value system guiding the conduct of its members. Many of the circumstances associated with situations of social strain or maladjustment were found to be characteristic of high-damage schools. Community instability and change, excess of bureaucratization in which rules became ends in their own right rather than means, predominance of formal relations, and a lack of communication between members were all evidence of societal change.

Implications were that: the school should be located where community instability is minimized; rapid or frequent changes in programs, administrative procedures, or routines should be avoided; an easy two-way communication should exist between all levels of school personnel to facilitate the exchange of information; parents should be given the opportunity to get to know the teachers and to know the policies of the school administration; students should be given the opportunity to participate in planning school programs and in making decisions; the principal should have the personality, educational philosophy, training, and ability adequate for the job; and there should be good interpersonal and academic relations between teachers, students,and parents.

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A Socio-Psychological Study

SCHOOL VANDALISM

by

Dr. Nathan Goldman

A variety of causes for vandalism and damage to public schools have been posited by investigators. Some find the cause in the child, some in the parents, and some in the schools. We find a variety of causes ranging from inadequate custodial service and parental irresponsibility to personality aberration in the child. Prescriptions for cure include such diverse techniques as putting screens on vulnerable windows, frequent police patrol of schoolbuilding areas, or making the parents pay for the damage.

Actually, however, there has been no systematic research program to investigate the various possible causes of damage to public school property. Believing that such a study might provide data leading to the understanding and control of vandalism, and, in addition to saving money, might provide much needed information leading to understanding of this peculiar form of child behavior, we undertook to make just such a study of the public school system of Syracuse, New York.

Since the everyday damage to windows, books, equipment, desks, walls, etc. constitutes a greater total cost to the schools than the fewer spectacular events which come to the attention of the public, it was decided to focus the investigation on a consideration of the socio-psychological differences between schools having different degrees of damage to the everyday variety. The school, thus, was the unit of study instead of the individual.

All of the 16 public junior-high and senior-high schools in Syracuse participated in this two-year study. We sought for variables in schools rated high in damage and those rated low, variables that might be used to account for such differences. Each school was evaluated on a damage scale twice, some three times. To obtain the additional information needed, teacher interviews, student questionnaires, and a history of each school were used.

On the basis of the corrections obtained in the analysis of this data, the following conclusions were reached about the relations between certain observed variables and the amount of damage in the schools studied.

CONCLUSIONS

Low socio-economic status and high instability of the community.-It was shown that high damage is associated with the low socio-economic status of the census tract in which the school is located, the advanced age of the

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buildings, and the low occupational status of fathers of students. Two of our low socio-economic rank schools, however, did not have the expected high damage.

In the histories of the schools, our respondents stressed the transiency and instability of the area. It is very probable, therefore, that a low socio-economic lever, coupled with instability and high rate of transiency, is characteristic of schools with high-damage rates. In such an area the student is less likely to identify with the conventional values of education and of property than in a more stable and middle-class neighborhood.

Change and instability in school.- Frequent staff turnover or changing a large segment of the staff at one time may disrupt the functioning of the school. A change in the school program or introducing a new grade will create, at least temporarily, some disturbance in ordered relations. Rapid or extensive changes may affect definitions of conduct, increasing disorganization and the probability of deviant behavior by the students.

Personal identification with the school.- A relatively low level of interest in the academic program and a relatively low degree of self-identification with the school was characteristic of students in high-damage schools. Drop-out rates were positively related to the damage rank of the school. It was indicated that dissatisfaction arose when students felt the curriculum did not meet their needs or when they felt that the school administration was not sufficiently concerned with student welfare. Teachers and parents in high-damage schools also seem to have lower identification with the school.

Administration and leadership.- Teachers in low-damage schools, in contrast to those in high-damage schools, reported that the administration in the school was democratic, strong, or rigid. The authoritarian nature of school administration was highlighted in the reports of the students in high-damage schools that they had little or no voice in planning school programs. In contrast, students in low-damage schools reported that they met regularly with the principal and helped plan school programs.

Interpersonal relations.- The nature of interpersonal relations in the school differed in high and low-damage schools. Relations in high-damage schools between various groups appeared to be more limited and more formal than those in low-damage schools. Teacher-prinicpal relations in high-damage schools also were reported to be on a much more formal level than those in low-damage schools.

The personality of the principal was frequently mentioned as an important factor in school morale. Feelings of insecurity, anxiety, or frustration in the principal were said to be communicated to members of his

staff. Where all school personnel - including the custodian - were able to establish good rapport with students and communicate the approved conduct patterns to them, conventional attitudes prevailed. Destruction of property and other norm violations were low.

Welfare.- It was indicated in interviews and in school histories that where the curriculum did not meet the educational or vocational requirements of the students, dissatisfaction was high. Obsolescence of school apparatus, failure to repair broken equipment, overcrowding in classrooms, etc. were interpreted as lack of interest of the administration in the student welfare. Resentment was expressed by students overtly against the tangible aspects - the physical plant and equipment - of the school.

Thus, community change, changes in the school program, student population and staff, administrative leadership, degree and type of interpersonal relationships, and the extent to which the welfare needs are felt satisfied, are all related to disorganizations of personal relations and to vandalism. Teachers and school administrators will very probably find in these conclusions many implications not apparent to a social-science researcher not trained in the art of education.

As a social system, the school has a technology, a set of rules of conduct governing the relations between members, and an ideology or value system guiding the conduct of its members. Many of the circumstances generally associated with situations of societal strain or maladjustment were found to be characteristic of high-damage schools. Community instability and change, and excess of bureaucratization (in which rules become ends in their own right rather than means), predominance of formal relations, and a lack of communication between members are all evidence of societal strain.

IMPLICATIONS

What are some of the implications for educators that can be drawn from this study? For one thing, community instability and change were found significantly related to the amount of damage in a school, and since it is known that communities change in a fairly predictable way, the school should be located where these would be minimized.

Not only that, the curriculum should be kept abreast of changes in the composition of the student population and should be attuned to the students' needs. Teachers should be aware of changes in the interests of the student body.

Rapid or frequent change in program, administrative procedures, or routines should be avoided. When changes in several areas of the school program or organization take place at one time without proper adjustment

of the personnel involved, the strains created may lead to serious disruption of the school's operation.

There should also be easy two-way communication between all levels of school personnel to facilitate the exchange of information. A matter which seriously disturbed many teachers in our study was that the results of their disciplinary referrals to the principal were not communicated back to them. An involvement of the teacher in the principal's decision would give the teacher a sense of participation in the administration of the school.

Parents should be given the opportunity to get to know the teachers and to know the policies of the school administration. A closer identification of parents with the school will add to the better identification of their children with the school values and norms.

Students should be given the opportunity to participate in planning school programs and in making decisions. They should be involved actively in the total life of the school to the point of emotional identification with the school so that he will pridefully speak of "his school."

The role played by the principal is significant. Since the principal is the key figure in determining school policy and the administration of that policy, careful selection of the principal is essential. Care should be taken to see that his personality, educational philosophy, training, and ability as a leader are adequate for the job.

The administration and leadership of the school determines, to a large extent, the nature of the interpersonal and academic relations. These relations should be structured so as to increase identification of teachers, students and parents with the school.

From the point of view of the community, school vandalism is of concern because it represents a simultaneous threat to two important values in our society - education and property. An attack on these two highly valued institutions by the child may be a portent for more serious attacks on society when he reaches the adult age.

Note: This is a condensation of a report by Dr. Nathan Goldman, Associate Professor of Sociology, and Research Associate, Youth Development Center, appearing recently in the professional magazine, The Education Digest. The author was project dir ctor of a two-year vandalism study sponsored by the U. S. Office of Education. His final report was entitled, "A Socio-Psychological Study of School Vandalism."